

Advance Praise for *Marion Hatley*

“Like Marion Hatley’s own creations, Beth Castrodale’s début novel is sewn, sentence by elegant sentence, with exquisite care and beauty. With clear-eyed assurance it explores the burden of secrets, the virtue of perseverance, and the joys of renewal. As a portrait of a community—and life itself—it is deeply compassionate and utterly wondrous.”

—David Rowell, author of *The Train of Small Mercies*

“*Marion Hatley* is as smooth to step into as the Whisper Lifts that Marion sews for her customers. The plot flows like silk, supporting her search for identity, honor, and love.”

—Audrey Schulman, author of *The Cage*, *Swimming with Jonah*, *A House Named Brazil*, and *Three Weeks in December*

“*Marion Hatley* reminds us of women’s struggles to escape society’s corseting and pursue opportunities we take for granted today.”

—Nan Cuba, author of *Body and Bread*

“An expert and articulate historical novel. The period details, class protest, and feminist protest are particularly engaging, as is the central character, Marion, whose resourcefulness recalls that of Zola’s Denise Badu in *The Ladies’ Paradise*. In Marion’s case, her redesign of conventional corsets speaks to humanizing social constrictions for women as well as easing physical ones.”

—DeWitt Henry, founding editor of *Ploughshares*, Emerson Professor Emeritus, and author of *The Marriage of Anna Maye Potts*

“Marion Hatley is a beautiful story, beautifully told. The era of the 1930s’ sense of hypocritical morality is realized in many ways in rural Cooper’s Ford, outside Pittsburgh. Like many of the women in this novel, Marion Hatley has a secret shame for which she pays a price. But in the course of the book, she demonstrates her independence and secures her dignity, while helping others do the same. Her skills at inventing and creating women’s underthings designed to free them from the constrictions of the past are emblematic of the freedom she ultimately achieves.”

—Lee Jacobus, author of *Hawaiian Tales*, *Crown Island*, and *The Romantic Soul of Emma Now*

“An evocative portrait of a woman both sinned against and sinning. Her struggles against societal judgments remain relevant today.”

—Paula Bomer, author of *Inside Madeleine*

“Through her own trials and the trials of others she grows close to, Marion Hatley finds the heart within human frailty. A thoroughly rewarding read.”

—Gilmore Tamny, author of *My Days with Millicent*

“Castrodale offers profound insights into the characters who populate a Depression-era town—from women struggling for personal and financial independence to a soldier who has returned in body but not in spirit from World War I.”

—Grace Talusan, essayist and fiction writer

“Memory is the seamstress, and a capricious one at that. Memory runs her needle in and out, up and down, hither and thither. We know not what comes next, or what follows after.”

–Virginia Woolf, from Orlando: A Biography

Marion Hatley

A Novel



Beth Castrodale



GARLAND PRESS
Shrewsbury, Massachusetts

Copyright © 2017 by Beth Castrodale

All rights reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission from the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is entirely coincidental.

ISBN: 978-1-940782-02-7

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016954496

Published by:

GARLAND PRESS

P.O. Box 4142

Shrewsbury, MA 01545

www.garlandpress.com

Cover design by William Boardman

Whisper Lift ad by Gilmore Tamny and Beth Castrodale

Interior design by Diane Vanaskie Mulligan; Interior graphics used with permission via Shutterstock, "art deco ornamental flower pattern" copyright Asphixia

Printed in the United States of America

For my parents, with enduring gratitude and love

Chapter 1



MARION HATLEY WAS in the habit of looking for signs of discomfort in other women. On this Saturday train from Pittsburgh she found herself glancing between her magazine and a facing aisle seat three rows down. The occupant: a woman in early middle age, undistracted by reading materials or companionship. Ankles crossed, hands clasped at her waist, she stared ahead transfixed like a witness to a crime.

This habit of Marion's was nothing she welcomed or particularly enjoyed. But as a maker of ladies' underthings, she—like her mother, Vera, before her—had come to accept it as an occupational necessity. For in Vera's mind, some part of every woman's unhappiness was physical and therefore within the power of a corsetiere to relieve.

"We cannot free a customer from a hopeless marriage," she often said. "We cannot bring her beloved back from the grave. But we can save her from the torture of ill-fitting underclothes."

It was impossible for Marion to tell how much her fellow passenger's distress could be blamed on her corset, hidden far beneath her winter coat. Yet, almost certainly,

this garment was in some way sinning against her—through drooping or gripping shoulder straps, maybe, or a bodice that here chafed, there restricted, and nowhere granted improvements worth the pains. These faults and more were typical of her rivals' handiwork, and Marion had taken on the duty of removing them from the ranks of her customers' difficulties.

Enough, she told herself, aware that her fellow passenger, like the many other women Marion had observed over the years, might feel like something trapped beneath a magnifying glass.

She turned her attention to the shifting scenery beyond the nearest window—snow-bright fields, then dark stands of pine, then the sooty backs of track-side buildings—and considered how her own difficulties, the ones she was now fleeing, far eclipsed any that could be posed by a poorly fitted corset. She tried, again, to take hope that once the girls back at the shop got the word around—that Marion Hatley, “the home wrecker,” was no longer employed there—such business as had been lost would soon rebound. Marion doubted that the many men who patronized *La Charmante Femme* on behalf of their mistresses would give half a damn about how she spent her time outside the shop. But several long-standing customers, all of them married women, pledged to never again darken *La Charmante's* door as long as Marion remained on staff.

One of these customers had been Livia Foxholm, who on a Monday of the previous month, glimpsed the scene that was to be Marion's undoing: Benton Granger's sky-blue Packard pulling up before Allen's Shoes, which he—and Marion—believed to be a safe distance from *La Charmante*. The Packard released Marion for a day of work, but not before she and Benton parted with

“a lengthy and passionate embrace” (a description that, though churned out by the rumor mill, did not embellish the truth). Perhaps because of the state she’d been in, still love-tipsy from her night with Benton, Marion never spotted Livia. In all likelihood, by the time Marion came down from the clouds and got to work, Livia was well on her way to getting word of what she’d witnessed to her sister, Althea: Benton’s wife.

In the days since, as stories of the “lengthy and passionate embrace” traveled along the gossip wire and made their way back to Marion, Benton had been out of town on business and had left no messages (by telephone or mail) at Marion’s boardinghouse, bringing their affair to an end no better than she’d braced herself to expect. When, instead of a note from Benton, there came a letter from Ned Cook, the cousin she’d never met, Marion couldn’t help but see its appearance as more than coincidental. Though she didn’t believe in God or fate, it seemed some larger, if imperfect, force might be interceding on her behalf.

In so many words, Ned’s letter said, *My mother is dying, and if you ever wish to meet her, your time is running out.* Ned and his mother, Marion’s Aunt Elsie, lived just thirty miles from Pittsburgh. Yet Vera, a divorced working woman with little time to spare, had never brought Marion to visit her sister, and hadn’t made the trip herself for years, not from any malice, so far as Marion knew. Day-to-day demands had simply gotten in the way, persisting, unfortunately, up to the time of Vera’s death, nearly two years before.

After receiving the letter, Marion reached Ned by phone and learned in a roundabout way, after a few moments of polite conversation, that Elsie was in need of an evening caregiver. In another *by-the-way*, Marion learned that the local school was searching for a temporary teacher,

the current one having just married, disqualifying herself from further service.

In so many words, Marion asked, *Could I possibly be of assistance to Aunt Elsie, and also to the school?*, mentioning her yellowing degree from normal school but none of her troubles in Pittsburgh. In so many words, Ned replied, *Yes and Yes*.

Thank God, Marion thought. *Thank Ned*.

Now, as quickly as the train barreled her toward these new duties, the relief Marion had felt since speaking to Ned was being overcome by a sense of dread, a sense that one foolish, thoughtless act—the entanglement with Benton—had simply begotten another.

She knew next to nothing about her Aunt Elsie and even less about caring for the sick. And her teaching experience, nearly a decade in her past, had spanned mere months—only long enough for her to figure out that she'd been far happier, and far better paid, designing and sewing underthings for *La Charmante Femme*, alongside Vera. So that's just what she'd done, and it was something she'd never regretted, until she made a hash of things.

Now, what on earth was she getting herself into?

Still, Marion did not wish herself back in Pittsburgh. If ahead of her lay a deep-blue sea, behind her most certainly was a devil, perhaps in Benton's favorite dinner jacket.

Amid all the chaos, Marion's greatest source of hope rested in a wooden-handled bag in the train's luggage compartment: bits of Vera's vision for a shaping garment that would be so flattering, so comfortable, that labeling it a *corset* would be "equal to an insult": Vera's words. The bits included Vera's sketches and early efforts to give them form: cut pieces joined or not, full first attempts, and various other odds and ends. Aside from these things were

Vera's musings about what more might be done with this seam or that strap to both accommodate the figure and allow for graceful shaping. Unfortunately, these musings existed only as clouded memories for Marion.

Make something of these scraps and hopes and dreams, Marion thought. Make something of them for Vera's sake and the sake of uncomfortable women everywhere—perhaps chief among them, Marion herself.

As the train slowed to a stop at Cooper's Ford station, Marion searched the platform for Ned. "I'm six feet three and on the thin side," he'd told her, over the phone, "and I'll be wearing a red muffler."

In the mid-winter gloom she noticed first the bright muffler and then the man, upright and neat as his penmanship, his expression as mournful as she'd expected. He scanned the train windows, but of course he would not see her; all the carriage lights had been extinguished.

Rising from her seat Marion finally met the gaze of the woman three rows down. They nodded to each other, both attempting smiles, but the look of distress did not depart the stranger's eyes. What troubles of her own might she be fleeing from or returning to?

Moving down the aisle, Marion called out to her, "Good luck."



Within minutes, she and Ned were well into the countryside, the Ford's engine laboring gamely as they climbed then descended rolling hills, passing farmsteads blanketed in snow.

Marion had spent nearly all of her thirty-three years

in Pittsburgh, not because she wished to avoid places like Cooper's Ford, though Vera had expressed a strong preference for city living until the time of her death. As for country living, Marion had resolved to come to her own conclusions about it. But seeing the gray of sky and snow—no, *feeling* it, it pressed upon her like a headache—she had some sense of why her mother had left the small farming town of her birth. Vera had needed color and bustle and people, even when it might have been better to have had a reprieve from them.

Whether Vera's only sibling, Elsie, chose to remain in the country out of a special affection for it, Marion had no idea. Vera had spoken so rarely of Elsie it was almost if she'd had no sister at all.

"How has your mother been?"

"Some days are fine, others quite bad. Lately, mornings have been better than nights, though the last two days haven't started out so well."

"I'm sorry."

Marion heard him swallow. She kept her eyes on the road.

As they rounded a bend Ned braked. "Right there's a way to the school. Would you like me to take you past?"

Ned was leaning toward Marion's window, drawing her attention to a path up a rise. Was he suggesting they leave the car and hike up the hill? Then she noticed wheel ruts in the frozen mud. This counted for a road.

"That's very kind, but Mr. Fanion has agreed to take me there tomorrow. He wants to show me the ropes and go over my lesson plans."

"He doesn't waste any time, does he?"

"There's no time to waste, it seems." She was to be in school on Monday morning.

"Well, just so you know, the school's a half-mile from

the farm. Nice walk, usually.”

They’d no sooner rounded the next bend than Ned braked again. Swaggering ahead along the shoulder was a tall, thin man in a wool cap and long gray coat. Ned tooted the horn, and the stranger fluttered a wave up behind himself, as if he did not wish to be interrupted.

“There’s Elder Baines,” he said with quiet pride, as if he’d conjured this person by will.

Not a swagger but a limp, Marion realized, glancing back as they passed. In contrast to his labored gait his face, set in concentration, was that of someone fairly young.

“Was he injured?”

“Wounded in France, poor fellow. Got the gas, too, though for all that he gets around pretty well. Here we are.”

Ned hauled the wheel to the right, taking them through a break in a stand of pines, onto a graveled path wider than the one to the school, though not by much. As the car lurched and jounced along, the stand of pines yielded to rolling, open land on both sides. The lane wound toward a rise on which stood a white farmhouse and beside it a raw-boarded barn. Nearer, to their left, was a frozen pond. To the right, a good distance from the lane, were a humbler house and barn, both gray but in respectable shape except for a slight list to the front porch.

“Our tenants, the Lisles,” Ned explained.

Shortly, the lane opened out into a gravel apron that stretched between the back of the white house and the barn. Ned pulled up as far as he could to the house, passing a gas pump, a rusted metal barrel, and a dinner bell set into the high fork of a white-washed tree trunk.

Ned parked the car and cut the engine. “Why don’t I take you inside to see Mother. I can bring up your things later.”

They entered the house through the back porch, step-

ping first into a dim cloakroom, where Ned helped Marion out of her coat. From there he led her through a plain but tidy kitchen and then past the dining room and parlor, both arranged with the kind of dark, formidable furniture that required regular polishing. Indeed, a faint smell of lemon oil and beeswax pervaded.

Marion's brief impression of these rooms was that they were rather lacking in color—or rather color in a brighter register than brown, dark green, or maroon. In these surroundings, the outfit she'd chosen, a belted *crepe-de-chine* tea dress, one of the more sober in her collection, made her feel like something brought in from a hothouse. Though primarily black, it was splashed with showy crimson flowers. After dressing, Marion had painted her nails a matching red and had once again savored the satisfying sense of completion, like the ringing of little bells, afforded by the right polish or jewelry. Now, the red had never seemed brighter.

She followed Ned up a turning staircase to a hallway that ran the length of the upstairs. All the doors along the hall were closed but for one, and from this room issued the long, dragging breaths of sleep.

"Why don't you wait here a moment," Ned whispered, leaving Marion at the head of the stairs. He crept toward the open door and craned his head inside.

"Mother?" he called softly. "*Mother?*" There was a sharp coo of surprise followed by dreamy mumblings. "Marion is here. Would you like to see her?"

Marion felt, once again, the clutch of dread.

"Marion." Ned stood aside from the door, extending his arm into the room.

She stepped forward, unsteady in her pumps, and entered the bedroom. Though all the blinds were drawn, some daylight still intruded, faintly illuminating the figure

on the bed, the assortment of bottles and glasses on the nightstand. Among these things was a brass bell, black paint mostly worn from its wooden handle. As gently as he could Ned lifted the blind nearest the bed. Then he excused himself quietly and stepped from the room.

Though by Ned's report Aunt Elsie had just turned fifty, her illness had aged her twenty years or more. The flesh of her face and neck was loose and sallow, the corners of her mouth drawn down into lines of permanent displeasure. Her hair, a uniform iron-gray knotted at the nape, had thinned so that her scalp showed pinkly beneath. Yet the beauty that Marion had known through Vera—an assertiveness of chin and nose, a fine outward curve to the cheeks—was there to be detected. It seemed to struggle its way forward, or rather Marion was struggling to hold it out as something recognizable from the stranger on the bed.

Elsie's filmed eyes roved the ceiling, and Marion was not at all sure her presence had been registered. Then Elsie turned her head toward Marion, as if she were no particular novelty, good or bad.

"There you are." Though she'd just been roused, her voice was unexpectedly strong and clear. "Please sit down, Marion."

Marion glanced toward the wooden chair by the headboard.

"You can sit on the bed."

She did.

"You came sooner than I thought."

A reproach? "It turned out to be a good time for me."

"You haven't been busy, then?"

"I've had a lull," Marion said, "in the sewing." Not true, really. But it was the best excuse to come to mind.

"It's the times, you suppose?"

"I imagine so."

Elsie looked her over without lifting her head from the pillows. "Did you make that dress?"

"No. It's store-bought." She couldn't tell whether Elsie approved or disapproved. As she did not elaborate, Marion assumed the latter. In fact, the air seemed to have thickened with displeasure.

"It looks like the kind of thing your mother would have made. The kind of thing an actress would wear."

From the emphasis on *actress*, Marion doubted this was a compliment. She wondered what Elsie would make of the fact that she, Marion, had been compared a few times to Louise Brooks but far more often to "the vamp," Theda Bara, though the latter comparison came less and less as the silent-screen actress, once a living, breathing "Cleopatra," slowly faded from public memory. Bara had been replaced by the younger, slinkier glamour girls who populated the Talkies, girls much like the beauties who sparkled in the darker corners of the life Marion had left behind—the booze-fountain bars she'd been towed into, on Benton's graceful arm.

Elsie went on: "Funny how you picked right up where Vera left off, with the sewing."

Marion didn't answer. Instead, she listened as voices floated up from downstairs, Ned's and a woman's. The voices grew louder until they could be heard in the stairwell, then just beyond the bedroom door.

That quickly, Elsie had dropped back into sleep, her slack mouth exhaling in little puffs. In a moment, Ned was back in the doorway, a question in his eyes. He looked at Elsie to get his answer, then turned to the figure behind him, a woman with dark eyes and a straight line for a mouth. The most cheerful thing about her was her new-looking apron, with its red piping and pattern of red clocks and

roosters.

As gently as she could Marion stood up from the bed, nonetheless rousing Elsie, who announced, "I'm awake."

Ned led the woman in. "Marion, this is Ina Lisle. She's been taking care of Mother a good deal, and she'll be going over matters with you."

"How do you do?" Marion said.

"Miss." Ina nodded Marion's way, not quite meeting her eye.

"Ina knows everything," Elsie said, a lilt of complaint in her voice.

"I don't know as I'd go that far," Ina replied.

Marion smiled, hoping to put Ina at ease, and maybe herself, too. "Well, I'm sure you'll be a great help to me."

Ina didn't smile in reply, merely nodded once more. Then she passed Marion to make her way to the other side of the bed. There, she laid the back of her hand across Elsie's brow.

"How did your morning go, Mrs. Cook?"

"About the same as yesterday."

"You've had some pain then?"

Elsie nodded, her set mouth suggesting this was an understatement.

Ina shook into her palm a large white pill from one of the amber bottles arrayed on the nightstand. Soon, Marion presumed, she'd learn the use of every one of them. Then, Ina held one arm out before Elsie and braced the other behind her back.

"One," Ina began, and Elsie made a face. "Two. Three." On this count she was up, still holding onto Ina's arm. Seeing Ina grabbing for the pillows with her free hand, Marion helped prop them up behind Elsie. Ina nodded in thanks.

Sitting upright, Elsie was transformed, her face shining, her eyes looking sharply about like a perched hawk's.

She took the pill from Ina, then a water glass, and swallowed her medicine. Settled back again, Elsie inclined her head toward Ina, who was refilling the water glass.

“How’s Caspar today?”

“Managing.”

“Ned tells me he still looks pretty banged up.”

Ina busied herself squaring the pill bottles. “He’s better by the day, ma’am.”

“Well, seeing a doctor’s no cause for embarrassment. Caspar’s not the first man to take a fall down the stairs, and he won’t be the last.”

“True enough, ma’am.”

It was clear that Ina wished to be finished with this subject, and so Marion cut in. “So you’ll be going through the routines with me, Ina?”

“Yes, miss.” Ina was plainly relieved. “Would this afternoon suit you? After dinner?”

“Certainly.”

“You can do it now, as far as I’m concerned,” Elsie interjected.

Ina looked from Elsie to Marion. “But Mr. Cook said you might need some rest.”

In truth, Marion had caught a second wind. Still, it seemed rude to speak of a patient’s care over her own head.

“Well,” Elsie said, “Ned must have given you the broadest picture. Ina will be seeing to me days, and you’ll have nights, once you’re finished at the school. And most of the weekends, though you and Ina can decide how you want to trade off. The doctor sees me once a week, Fridays at four. Though he may come more with time.”

Ned had alerted Marion about the doctor coming. It had been one of the details that made Marion think she could go through with this.

Elsie went on: “I like to be read to, and Ned will put

over there the items of my choosing.” She nodded toward a small pedestal table in the corner. It was stacked with books, and on top of these was a *Saturday Evening Post*. “Those ones in the back are for Walter, Ina. For his practice.”

“I’ll see he gets them. Maybe he could read some of them to Mr. Baines. He’s started that, you know.”

“Good. Now Marion, why don’t you get that rest?”

Marion looked to Ina. “You don’t need any help from me now?”

“No, miss. Mr. Cook wanted me to tell you your room is down the hall, last door on the right, near the bath.”

“Thank you.” Marion nodded to Ina then Elsie, idly straightening her belt, whose improper lining gave it a habit of twisting.

Noticing this bit of fussing, Elsie’s eyes locked on Marion’s hands. The polish. Her face showed no disapproval, nothing. She simply stared. Then the moment passed. Elsie sank back a little on the pillows and let out a little two-tone sigh, like a chickadee’s call. Only from Vera had Marion ever heard this sound, and in Vera’s case it had suggested resignation or amusement, sometimes both. *Oh, well.*

If they were not to constantly derail her thoughts, Marion would have to grow accustomed to these unsettling shadows of sisterhood. Though surely there could hardly be two women more different than Vera and Elsie.

Soon afterward, Elsie dropped back into sleep, or so it seemed. As Marion crept toward the door Elsie’s voice, weaker now, called out to her. “I didn’t believe you would come.”



Marion's room was meager in a fairy-tale sort of way. "Cozy" might be the more generous description for the impression given by the roof pitch intruding along the far wall, the peeling cornflower wallpaper, the sense of being penned in by ill-fitting furniture: a bed set into the roof angle, a bulky armoire, a writing desk and chair, and under a quilted cover, the unmistakable outline of a sewing machine.

Marion wondered how personally she was to take this last object. She'd planned to take a break from workaday sewing, including mending, and if Ned or Elsie hoped she might extend her services in this direction, she resolved to be firm in her refusals, however rude that might seem. Marion's own machine and most of her silks, satins, and other materials remained in Pittsburgh. The only sewing-related items she'd brought were the scraps and sketches for the corset-in-progress.

On the floor by the foot of the bed were Marion's trunk and tapestry bag, and her fully stocked cosmetics case, which she'd packed with Vera's old saying in mind: *Lipstick never fails to give one courage*. Even if Marion wore only lipstick here—the pinks and never the reds—the other tubes, compacts, jars, and bottles felt like essential moral support, perhaps never more necessary than now.

She hadn't remembered Ned bumping along the hall with her bags. Then she noticed, to the right of the armoire, a narrow staircase descending to the first floor. He must have brought them up that way. As she was to discover, the stairs led to the kitchen, leaving no doubt that she'd taken up the servant's quarters. Marion was untroubled to have been put in this position and in fact took comfort in it. She was here to do as she was required, same as ever, only now she must be inconspicuous. Never her strong suit, given her Theda-Bara-ish looks, fading though they were, and

her fondness for flashier clothes. Yet everything about her surroundings promised to help her in this endeavor: She was a turtle with a shell, a grasshopper with a leaf to vanish against.

Too tired to think of unpacking, Marion removed her dress and hung it in the armoire, which was bare except for a chipped teacup of moth crystals on the shelf. Inside the door was a mirror, and she admired once again the simple, curve-hugging slip of peach silk whose design had not changed since it was passed down to her by Vera.

“The Pink Lady,” its name alone toned down from Vera’s original—“the Courtesan.”

No, Elsie, I didn’t make my dress, but I’ve made scores of these, to fit every combination of shoulder and bust and waist and tummy and bottom created by God. And undies to match.

Not bothering to fold back the fan-patterned quilt, Marion lay down on the sagging mattress and tried unsuccessfully to settle herself. No movement of hers, however slight, went unremarked upon by the springs. At last, by turning on her side and bringing her knees toward her chest, she balanced herself along a tolerable ridge. Lying still, Marion thought there must be at least a city full of girls—and no-longer-girls, like herself—suspended in little rooms like this, caught between one thing and the next. Any person or story you could imagine, it was out there, and probably multiplied beyond reckoning.

A decent young teacher had lost her job, just for getting married. Surely, there was a city of them, too. *If they only knew what I’ve done*, Marion thought, *I wouldn’t be allowed within miles of a school*. It hardly seemed fair, but what girl past thirty still believed life was fair?

They might learn the truth about her still. All Marion could hope is that she’d have seen Elsie off by then, just as

she'd promised Ned.

Before she drifted off, Marion thought again of the nail polish, certain she'd forgotten her remover. Then she remembered the scene outside, on the drive: where there was a gas pump there was gas, and where there was gas there was a way to make her hands as plain as a schoolteacher's.